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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 000096

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SUBJECT: UNDP GOING DOWN WITHOUT A FIGHT

Classified By: Amb. Alexander Vershbow. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) In a meeting that started off in front of a crowd of cameras and reporters, newly-selected United New Democratic Party (UNDP) chair Sohn Hak-kyu gave the Ambassador his assessment of North Korea's delay in providing a full declaration of its nuclear programs and (after the press left) his forecast for the UNDP in the April National Assembly elections. Sohn expressed his disappointment with North Korea's delay both publicly and privately, but said that it was important that we not lose momentum. He was relatively pessimistic about the UNDP's chances in April, saying that they would probably only win about 70 seats (down from their current 137), none of which were likely to be in the Seoul metropolitan area. Sohn was unable to articulate a specific policy vision that would distinguish the UNDP in the upcoming elections, instead treating its "opposition party" status as a foregone conclusion. End Summary.

North Korea on His Mind

¶12. (SBU) UNDP leader Sohn Hak-kyu began the January 14 meeting in front of reporters by thanking the Ambassador for his contributions to strengthening the U.S.-ROK alliance. Sohn noted that it was regrettable that the DPRK missed the deadline for submitting a full declaration of its nuclear programs, but also counseled not to be too worried yet. Sohn pointed out that North Korea's most recent New Year's editorial made no direct attack against South Korea and no reaffirmation of the nuclear programs, a sign that the emphasis has shifted. (NOTE: Although the editorial, in stark contrast to last year, made no mention of the country's nuclear status, indirect allusions to its nuclear weapons abound. END NOTE.) Sohn said that close cooperation between South Korea and the U.S. in the Six-Party Talks had improved our relationship and contributed to progress on North Korean nuclear issues. The UNDP, he said, hoped to continue to emphasize U.S.-ROK relations and expected that issues like OPCON transfer would resolve themselves naturally as the two countries continued to work together.

¶13. (SBU) After the reporters left the room, Sohn asked the Ambassador for his assessment of the state of play with North Korea. Sohn opined that it may take some time until North Korea approached the new ROK government, preferring to take a wait-and-see approach. Sohn said he thought Lee Myung-bak's approach to North Korea was realistic, but he also hoped Lee

would not stop progress on relations between North and South Korea.

Party Prospects

¶4. (SBU) Sohn said unabashedly that the UNDP was in a "seriously difficult" situation. Some party leaders were of the opinion that the UNDP might not win a single seat in the Seoul metropolitan area -- where it now holds nearly half of the 100 seats -- but hoped to get most of the seats in the liberal strongholds of North and South Jeolla Provinces. Ultimately, Sohn said, the UNDP may only win 70 seats in the 299-seat National Assembly. The defeat in December indicated that the UNDP needed a new, more pragmatic approach, according to Sohn. Many people in the party thought the focus needed to change from the left-wing ideology of the past -- on social, international, and North Korea policy -- but, at the same time, the party had to stay center-left to distinguish itself from the Grand National Party. Sohn seemed unconcerned with the possibility of more party defectors, saying that it was better for the party if extremists left.

¶5. (SBU) Sohn said the UNDP had experienced quite a change in its political stance in regard to U.S. and U.S.-North Korea relations, likely referring to Roh Moo-hyun's frequent anti-U.S. rhetoric. The general climate, he said, was that the party had to change, and that meant the UNDP could contribute more to the advancement of the U.S.-ROK relationship. Sohn mentioned that he hoped to travel to the U.S. to meet with political leaders and to enhance relations between the two countries. Nevertheless, he defended the party's past and said that not every policy the Roh government and the party had pursued was wrong -- sometimes the policies were just not communicated effectively.

¶6. (SBU) In danger of repeating past mistakes, Sohn was unable to articulate any specific policy or strategy that the party would use to counter GNP candidates beyond a recently announced real estate tax cut. In fact, he said that he agreed with many of Lee Myung-bak's proposed policies. If Lee Myung-bak's policy helped create jobs and made people's lives better, then Sohn would support him, but if his policies were not beneficial to the people (e.g. the President-elect's grandiose canal project), then UNDP would be firmly opposed. Without elaborating on how it would accomplish such a task, Sohn said the UNDP would be both the most supportive opposition political party and also the party with the firmest opposition in South Korea's political history.

FTA Jitters

¶7. (SBU) Sohn said that the party's opposition to the KORUS FTA should be changed. In fact, leaders of all the major Korean business associations had convened in his office just before he met with the Ambassador to appeal for the ratification of the FTA. Sohn, who supports the FTA, expressed some concern that hearing some U.S. leaders' comments criticizing the FTA made South Koreans worried about ratifying first. Sohn said that he personally believed in the free-market system and thinks Korea should ratify the FTA. (NOTE: Sohn told reporters on January 14 that he would support the FTA's ratification if the National Assembly passed adjustment assistance to compensate Korean farmers, but he has not been specific about his support for a ratification vote in February. END NOTE.)

Comment

¶8. (C) Almost one month after the progressives' landslide defeat in the presidential elections, Sohn's inability to

articulate a clear policy vision for the party underscores the UNDP's unresolved identity crisis. The party has been more focused on selecting a new leader -- including extensive debate about the proper mechanism for doing so -- than on revamping party policy, displaying the same focus on method over substance that dogged them during their Presidential primary. Through their Papal Court-like leader selection process, the progressives have put their faith in a man who only recently defected from the GNP and failed to win the UNDP's nomination as presidential candidate. They hope that Sohn's appeal as a successful former governor of the booming Gyeonggi province will help them salvage a few seats in the Seoul metropolitan area. However, Sohn seems to lack the vision to lead the UNDP out of its morass, and this, together with the party's likely routing in the National Assembly elections, virtually assures that Sohn will not likely continue to lead the party after April. Indeed, continuing defections from the party over the coming weeks may make Sohn and the UNDP irrelevant even before the April 9 elections are held.

VERSHBOW